

Connecting Outcomes, Goals, and Objectives in Transition Planning

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Lisa, who has mental retardation and requires limited supports, is in the 10th grade. She wants to work in the community when she graduates, preferably in a supermarket. Lisa also wants to live in her own apartment; participate in community recreation activities, such as hiking and bird watching on weekends; and participate in an adult basketball league during the week. Lisa's parents support her desired aspiration, although they are understandably anxious about her future. Her curriculum consists of school-based and community-based instruction in skills directly relating to her desired postschool outcomes. Because Lisa understands that she is learning skills that she needs to fulfill her aspirations, she is highly motivated to work on these skills.

Jill, also in the 10th grade, has specific learning disabilities that affect her abilities in reading, math, and overall organization. She is not sure what she wants to do when she grows up, but she is sure that she does not want to go to college. Her curriculum is primarily academic within the general high school curriculum, with necessary accommodations provided. Despite the concern and dedication of her teachers, Jill is discouraged and unmotivated. She sees little reason to stay in school and is in danger of dropping out.

These two students possess positive potential for future success, yet one appears to be embarking on a successful adult life, while the future for the other student seems bleak. The decisions and actions taken at this point in their lives will have an effect on them for years to come. This article describes the nature of the connection between goals and outcomes in transitions for young people, raises challenges for effective planning, and suggests strategies for enhancing the effectiveness of transition planning.

Transition planning teams often include special and general education teachers, guidance counselors, parents, vocational rehabilitation counselors, related services professionals—and the students themselves. Because self-determination is such an essential aspect of effective transition planning, we first discuss this as a framework for the remainder of our recommendations.

Overriding Role of Self-Determination

Self-determination is a combination of skills, knowledge, and attitudes (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998; Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 1998). Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1998) described self-determined behavior as

- Choice-Making.
- Problem-solving.
- Goal-setting and attainment.
- Risk-taking and safety.
- Self-regulation.
- Self-advocacy or leadership.
- Self-awareness or self-knowledge.

Because effective planning for the future depends on the student's ability to clarify his or her wishes and aspirations, self-determination is essential to all facets of the planning process (Thoma, 1999). We find close relationships among skills associated with self-determination, desired postschool transition outcomes, and their associated annual goals and short-term objectives (see box, "Self-Determination Skills").

Self-determination skills are essential to clarifying desired postschool transition outcomes for the following reasons:

- To decide on careers to pursue, students must know what they like, are good at, and are interested in. This is

Self-Determination Skills

Self-determination skill—choice-making, problem-solving, goal-setting/attainment, risk-taking/safety, self-regulation, self-advocacy, and self-awareness—are needed to clarify

- Postschool outcomes (statements of the student's future life in the areas of employment, postsecondary education and training, community living), which provide a rationale for the selection of
 - ✓ Annual goals, which state what the student will learn this year,
 - ✓ Short-term objectives, which provide specific statements of learning.

true also for recreation and other nonvocational community activities.

- To choose among careers, colleges, recreation opportunities, or places in which to live, students must have choice-making and decision-making abilities. They must also have experience in making choices and decisions.
- In all aspects of planning for the future, students must be able to clearly and confidently articulate their choices and desires, even when significant others do not entirely agree.

Because of the critical importance of self-determination skills in the transition process, educators should incorporate specific application of these skills into the curriculum and should include the skills in annual goals and short-term objectives. For example, an annual goal for Lisa could be to learn to choose a healthy diet that maintains her health; this goal would support her desired outcome of living in her own apartment.

Students can demonstrate self-determination in the transition planning

process by not only participating in individualized education program (IEP) meetings but by taking an active role (Field, Hoffman, & Spezia, 1998; Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 1998). For example, students can participate before meetings by sending invitations and planning the meeting, gathering assessment information, and setting up the room arrangements. During the meeting, students can present an overview of their current interests and future aspirations. Finally, following the meeting students can take an active role in seeking out information and experiences that will help them achieve their desired outcomes.

Linking Outcomes with Annual Goals and Short-Term Objectives

For the transition planning process to be effective, the team must specify desired outcomes for each student. This, however, is not sufficient. Instead, for each desired adult outcome, the transition IEP must specify what the student

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needs to learn in that year to increase the likelihood of attaining the outcome. These learning statements consist of annual goals and short-term objectives (or benchmarks).

How can teams ensure success in their transition planning efforts? The answer depends mostly on the clarity and strength of the connection among the desired postschool outcomes and the annual goals and short-term objectives. Figure 1 shows this connection; the desired adult outcome provides the context for the selection of one or more annual IEP goals and the associated short-term objectives.

To illustrate this relationship, Figure 2 shows the desired postschool vocational outcome for Lisa, along with associated annual goals and short-term objectives. Naturally, the number of annual goals and short-term objectives will vary, depending on the needs of individual students. Notice that by mastering a specific short-term objective, Lisa comes closer to completing the associated annual goal. This, in turn, helps her to approach attainment of her desired outcome. Figure 3 shows the corresponding information for the outcome of community living for Lisa. Because Lisa is not planning on attending college or pursuing postsecondary training, this outcome area is not provided. Note that the team selected these outcomes to reflect Lisa's current interests and future lifestyle aspirations, and that the outcomes can only be clarified with her active involvement in the planning process. These outcomes are also entirely feasible for Lisa; and there is a strong likelihood that, with continued effort, she will attain them.

Although transition outcomes should provide a clear direction for determining annual goals and short-term objectives, real-life teams may face several challenges in transition planning. If not addressed effectively, these challenges

Transition Through the Years

In 1990, with the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA Amendments of 1997; Public Law 105-17), transition became a critical mandate and component of the law. This mandate requires that schools provide a process for planning for students' attainment of future postschool outcomes through the development of an appropriate educational course of study. This process is defined as "an outcome-oriented process that promotes movement from school to postschool activities" (PL 101-476, Section 300.29).

Further, IDEA goes on to clarify that transition planning must be "based on the individual student's needs, taking into account the student's preferences and interests" (PL 101-476, Section 300.29). The adult postschool outcomes that are described in transition IEPs focus on the areas of employment, postsecondary education and training, and community living.

In recent years, transition planning has received a great deal of attention from both the U.S. Department of Education and state education agencies. Poor outcomes of graduates from the special education system have been a primary reason for this focus (Patton & Dunn, 1998; Wehman, 2001). Earlier studies highlighted poorer outcomes for students exiting the special education system (Hasazi, Gordon, & Roe, 1985; Mithaug, Horiuchi, & Fanning, 1985). More recent data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study indicate that, although some gains have been made, students with disabilities continue to face substantial challenges in finding employment, attending postsecondary education, and achieving residential independence (Wagner, Blackorby, Cameto, Hebbeler, & Newman, 1993).

Why have we not achieved better outcomes? The connection between students' outcomes and their annual goals and short-term objectives is one of the critical factors in answering this question.

Figure 1. Relationship of Postschool Outcomes to Annual Goals and Short-Term Objectives

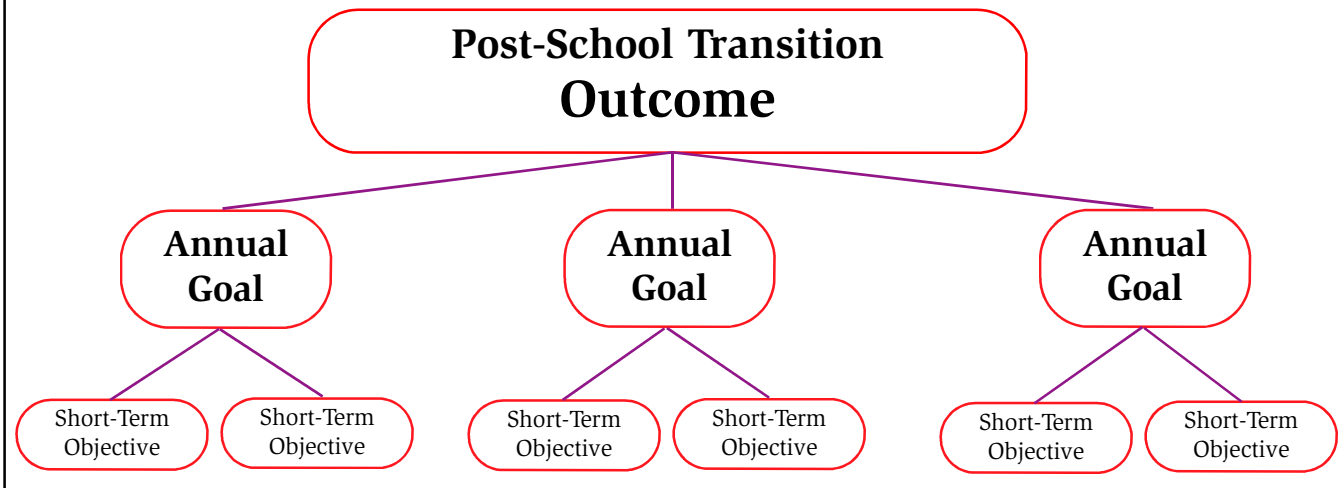
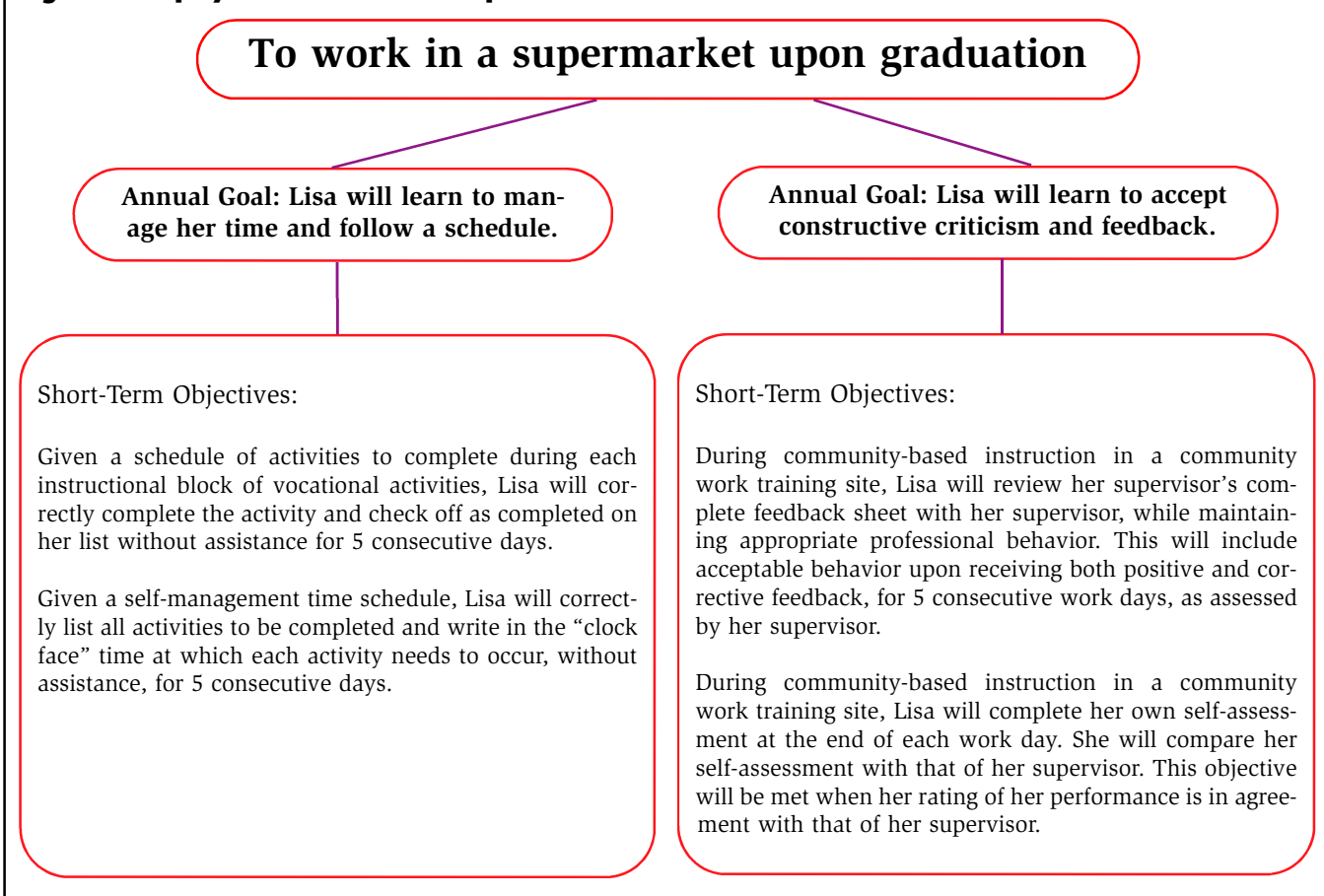


Figure 2. Employment Transition Example



can seriously derail the transition planning effort.

Challenges and Strategies in Making the Outcomes-Goals-Objectives Connection

We have found seven specific challenges that may complicate the process of clarifying the relationship among

postschool transition outcomes, annual goals, and short-term objectives.

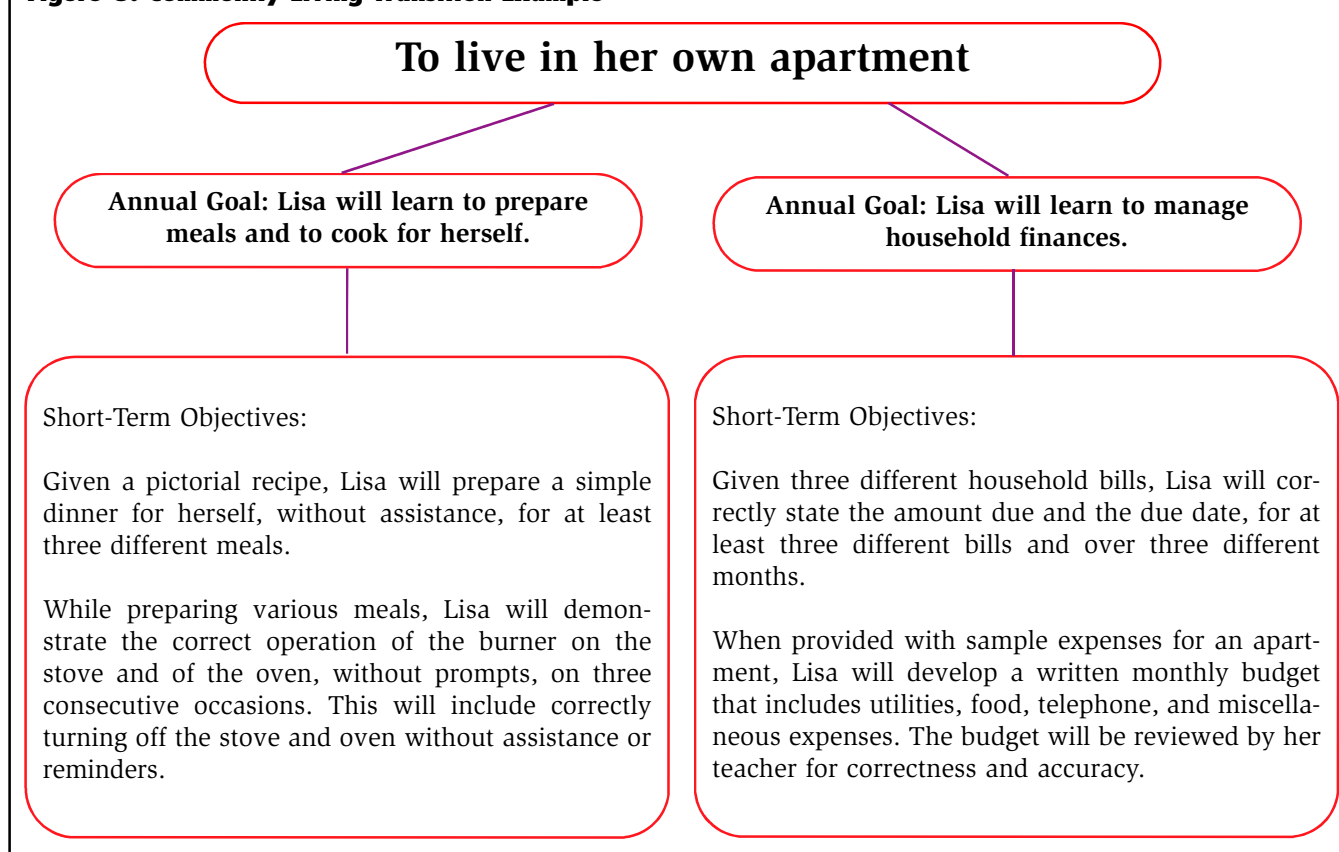
Challenge 1: Outcomes Too Vague

Outcomes may be too vague to provide direction to the transition plan. For example, outcome statements such as "To pursue an area of vocational inter-

est" are of little use in the planning effort.

Students need some prior experience to clarify outcomes. Community-based work experiences, such as job shadowing, job training, or situational assessment, can help students decide what they want to pursue (Wehman, 2001). Similarly, experience in specific aca-

Figure 3. Community-Living Transition Example



demic courses, along with career awareness activities, can help students clarify postsecondary outcomes.

Another promising avenue for addressing this challenge is the use of person-centered planning strategies (Everson, 1995; Miner & Bates, 1997; Steere, Wood, Pancsofar, & Butterworth, 1990). These less formal planning strategies help students develop a profile of their own abilities, desires, and personal connections and plan for a desired future. Although these strategies require time and planning, they are essential to providing clearer and more meaningful outcome statements.

Challenge 2: Outcomes Perceived as Unrealistic

Some team members may perceive certain outcomes as “unrealistic.” The primary way to address this challenge is for all team members, including the student, to further explore the demands associated with the desired adult outcome. A family interview at regular intervals can help parents explore future outcomes in a more comfortable way

(Hutchins & Renzaglia, 1998). Experience in actual community environments is again essential. It is imperative that team members do not limit ideas unnecessarily without first attempting to determine possible avenues for attaining the outcome. This, of course, may require modification and revision of the outcome, but not outright rejection.

Challenge 3: Goals and Objectives Too Vague

As with transition outcomes, annual goals and short-term objectives may be too vague. This is particularly true at the level of the short-term objective. Short-term objectives should include clear and unambiguous learning statements of what the student will do, along with clear and appropriate mastery criteria (Alberto & Troutman, 1999). A simple test of clarity is to ask, “Can I determine when the student has achieved this objective?” If not, then the objective is too vague and should be revised.

Challenge 4: Connection Among Outcomes, Goals, and Objectives Unclear

Team members may discover a lack of connection among the desired outcomes and annual goals/short-term objectives. The team should provide a clear correspondence among these planning elements. Again, we suggest a simple test: “Will attainment of this objective and the larger goal lead to attainment of the desired outcome?” If not, one of these elements should be clarified or revised. Students should not continue to work on curricular content that does not lead to desired outcomes.

For each desired adult outcome, the transition IEP must specify what the student needs to learn in that year to increase the likelihood of attaining the outcome.

Challenge 5: Outcomes Not Revised

Team members may have neglected to revise or refine outcomes based on students' experiences. In a study of transition plans, Grigal, Test, Beattie, and Wood (1997) found that few transition plans were revised as students moved through high school.

As mentioned previously, students need multiple experiences to make decisions about their future. This suggests that many students will revise their desires and aspirations based upon these experiences. Teachers should work with families and other team members to provide frequent opportunities for students to reflect on experiences through surveys, writing assignments, and informal discussions. Again, person-centered planning approaches provide an excellent ongoing avenue for such discussions.

Challenge 6: Limited Expectations

Team members may have low or limited expectations about the student's future. As mentioned under Challenge 2, team members must not unnecessarily limit students before they have had a chance to try to attain outcomes. Too often, professionals have unnecessarily subjected people with disabilities to unnecessary limitations, which lead to stereotyping and prejudice.

Challenge 7: Lack of Action Planning

A final challenge is the lack of specific action planning steps to help the student achieve desired postschool outcomes. Although IDEA does not specifically require the development of an action plan, teams should develop a series of specific assignments to com-

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Questions to Enhance the Quality of Transition IEPs

1. Does the student take an active role in the transition IEP planning process?
2. Do all team members have a clear understanding of the student's strengths, interests, abilities, and support needs?
3. Has the team clearly defined desired postschool outcomes in areas such as:
 - Employment?
 - Postsecondary education or training?
 - Postsecondary living arrangements?
 - Participation in the community?
 - Other aspects of adult life?
4. If not, has the team clearly defined action steps for gathering information or providing the student with additional experiences, with appropriate timelines and responsibilities?
5. Are annual goals and short-term objectives clearly leading toward the attainment of future postschool outcomes?
6. Are annual goals and short-term objectives clear enough to guide the teaching process?
7. Do members of the team have positive and optimistic attitudes about the student's abilities to achieve the stated outcomes?
8. Does the team clarify or revise the student's outcomes as the student gains information and experiences?

plete to assist the student (Wehman, 1995). These include steps to investigate desired careers or postsecondary education placements, experiences to obtain in the community, and so forth. The student will also have responsibilities for completing action plan steps. Such action planning steps should be completed on an ongoing basis and should be used to help the student and the supporting team make revisions in the transition IEP, as necessary.

Each of these challenges is easier to address when students are able to make choices, participate in planning, and express their ideas and desires in a clear and assertive manner. These skills of self-determination, as discussed previously, are essential to developing clear connections between outcomes and annual goals and short-term objectives. Team members need to ensure that steps are taken to avoid these challenges to planning described here (see box, "Questions to Enhance the Quality of Transition IEPs").

How Can We Help Jill?

It is clear from the previous description of Jill that she is at risk of making an unsuccessful transition to adult life. How should Jill's team support her? The

following are some productive steps that they could take:

- Develop a profile of Jill's current interests, strengths, support needs, and close relationships. Person-centered planning strategies are excellent ways to obtain and organize this material. Of course, Jill should take a lead role in this.
- Help Jill clarify her aspirations. The people who participate in developing Jill's profile can help her connect her current interests and possible future jobs or community activities. Whenever Jill is unsure or needs more information to make a choice, an action plan should specify what steps the team will take to provide her with more experiences or information. Jill should take the lead role in implementing these action steps and then in using the experiences and information to refine and clarify her aspirations. This process should continue until her desired adult outcomes are clear enough to provide a direction to her education.
- Investigate some of Jill's personal connections, particularly family and friends. Who does she know who might assist her in learning about jobs in the community or places to

live? Who will be supporters for her after special education services end?

- Teach Jill specific skills for directing her own IEP meetings. Jill currently feels powerless; and by learning self-determination skills, she can gain a sense of control and purpose to her education.
- Provide Jill and her family with information about possible postsecondary training programs. Jill feels that she does not want to go to college, but she lacks information about other career training options. Providing this information to her will help her see the range of possibilities and help her make a more informed choice.
- Finally, Jill's team should act with a sense of urgency. Jill is at risk of dropping out of school, and her time to receive entitled services is shorter every day. She needs support in setting a direction with her life now.

Final Thoughts

Clear correspondence between the desired postschool outcomes and the supporting annual goals and short-term objectives is a necessity in planning and ensures that future lifestyle aspirations are tied to what is being worked on now. By making this connection clear, we help students see the reason for their effort and to be motivated to continue their education. Although there are several challenges that can impede effective planning, teachers and other team members can take specific steps to overcome these challenges and enhance the quality of the planning effort. Professionals and other team members who assist students in making transition planning meaningful and effective not only contribute to their short-term success but also make potential contribu-

tions to future adult lives that will be characterized by satisfaction and an improved quality of life.

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Community-based work experiences, such as job shadowing, job training, or situational assessment, can help students decide what they want to pursue.
